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AUTHOR Nurss, Joanne R.; Singh, Ravinder
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the low rates of attendance and retention that had beset Atlanta's Family Literacy Program since its inception. To establish a meaningful dialog with participants, a qualitative interview approach was used. The sample was composed of current students, dropouts from Years 1 and 2, and graduates of Year 1. One-third of the population was randomly selected for participation, yielding the following sample sizes: 14 current students, 20 dropouts (Year 1), 14 dropouts (Year 2), and 5 graduates. Overall, the participants were happy with the program. Approximately 60 percent of the dropouts left for personal reasons, the rest for reasons of dissatisfaction with the literacy program. More Year 1 dropouts commented about the low quality of the instructors than did those in Year 2. About half of the second year dropouts were working; the other half were at home caring for their children as were over three-fourths of the Year 1 dropouts. In contrast, those women who completed the first year (graduates) were working, seeking work, or continuing in school. Teachers appeared to be the most important aspect of the program and were highly praised by students who were satisfied. Many negative comments were received about the computer program. Most mothers were pleased with the program for their children and felt they had learned a lot. The purchase of more computers, better feedback, and a more structured program were recommended. (The interview schedule is appended.) (YLB)

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ATLANTA FAMILY LITERACY COLLABORATIVE

Interviews of Participants:
Year 1 and 2

Joanne R. Nurss & Ravinder Singh

Center for the Study of Adult Literacy
Georgia State University, Atlanta

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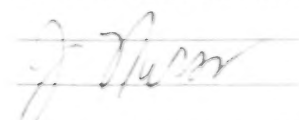
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Introduction

The primary focus of this study was to investigate the low rates of attendance and retention that have beset the Family Literacy Program since its conception. In order to establish a meaningful dialogue with participants, a qualitative interview approach was used.

The sample was comprised of: current students; drop-outs from Years 1 and 2; and graduates of Year 1. One-third of the population was selected for participation, yielding the following sample sizes: 14 current students; 20 drop-outs (Year 1); 14 drop-outs (Year 2); and 5 graduates. The sample was chosen randomly and represented all three school sites equally. If a participant could not be contacted for an interview, another person was randomly chosen from the same category. An open-ended questionnaire guided the interviewing process (see Appendix A). Some of the current students interviewed had good attendance and others had poor attendance.

The project social worker with the assistance of the project coordinator initiated contact with the participants and established an interview time.^{*} Each participant was given a brief introduction to the purpose of the interview and was allowed to ask any questions about the study. All interviews were anonymous and confidential. Interviews were conducted at the residences of the participants or at the program sites and usually lasted 15-20 minutes. Only the interviewer and social worker were present during the interview. All interviews were tape recorded.

Current Students (Year 2)

Overall, the 14 respondents were very helpful and forthright during the interviews. Everyone provided their own ideas about the program, but their responses suggested similar experiences during participation in the program.

^{*} Special thanks to Sandra Moore and Tori Hornsby for assistance in arranging the interviews.

The first question was: "What do you like about the program?" Everyone in this group gave positive responses to this question. Sample responses included:

- helps me be a better parent to my child
- teaches me to have self-control
- gives me an opportunity to meet people and get out of house
- helps me where I left off in school
- like being able to go to school with my child
- small group environment
- network of friends and individual attention
- chance to work on skills
- parent and child time (PAC)
- the attention teachers give you
- the activities and field trips

The second question asked: "What did you learn during your participation?" Many of the respondents cited specific skills that they learned in the program; for example:

- improved math skills (multiplication and division)
- reading, spelling, and writing
- learned how to communicate with others
- prepared for the GED
- self-esteem
- learned to be patient with kids
- fractions, decimals, and percentages
- job skills (i.e. be on time)
- writing skills
- social and cultural awareness through trips
- learned more about being a single parent
- parenting skills — be more patient and calm

The third question asked the participants to talk about what their children learned. All responses suggested that they were satisfied with their child's learning; for example:

- learned to write numbers and count
- say name
- to be polite and say thank you
- colors and figures
- abc's
- learned home address
- learned to be without me
- playing with others
- sharing with other kids
- how to work in groups
- solve problems among themselves

Next the participants were asked what they felt that they did not learn. Here the responses varied, but were mainly positive about their learning experience; for example:

- did not learn spelling skills
- really learned everything
- did not learn computers
- feel that I am being taught everything
- did not learn how to get into my field (cosmetology)
- GED training — took too long to get us on grade level
- tips and guidance for finding a house

The one major concern was the lack of computer training. A few of the respondents were adamant about the absence of computer usage and training. They felt that computer training was used to recruit them into the program and then was not adequately provided. Otherwise most of the respondents were satisfied with what they were learning in the program.

Next respondents were asked what they did not like about the program. Most respondents felt very positively about the program, but a few did have complaints about particular aspects of the program itself. Responses included:

- loved it...liked everything about it
- did not like schedule changes without notice
- don't like students being able to join the program near the end of the school year — there should be some deadline
- too much interaction between child and me
- being told not to keep challenging the computer issue
- new students taking more of the teacher's time
- liked everything
- spending too much talking time — needs to be more academic
- teachers not treating us like adults
- hours are too long

Students were asked about their teachers and the instruction they received in the classroom. Overall, they really liked their teachers and felt that the teaching was excellent. They said:

- my teacher taught me more than I knew
- teacher doesn't hesitate in helping me
- my kids just love their teacher — they talk about her all the time

- last year there were some problems, but this year the teacher is more attentive and helpful with the students
- the teacher breaks things down for me so I can understand better
- taught me how to be calm and patient with my kids
- showed me to allow my child to learn through playing
- makes things interesting to learn by relating them to everyday living
- she builds my self-esteem
- the teacher is a second mother to my kids
- pushes us to be the best
- my teacher really puts herself into the teaching

When asked about what things they would like changed in the program, most were hesitant and suggested that the program was great like it was. Others offered these suggestions:

- should have more academic time
- have more PAC time
- people should be on time and come more often
- less PAC time
- better food services
- less talking and more working
- have school on Friday's
- need more computers and typewriters
- more books
- have on-site computers and computer training for all sites
- better screening of students chosen for participation
- establish deadlines for registration
- administration should spend more time at all the sites
- open lunch so we can leave campus
- make sure flyers are accurate (i.e. computers on flyers, but not at sites)

Most of the women interviewed in this cohort (Year 2) were only going to school and not working at the present time. Many of them had plans for finding employment in the summer or taking care of personal business such as finding housing or taking care of the children. At the end of the interview they were asked if they had any additional comments about the program that were not addressed during the interview. They offered the following suggestions:

- teachers are too involved in trying to change our behavior with our children...they should let us discipline our own kids
- give us tips on parenting, but don't tell us how to raise our children
- recent essay contest should have been judged by the teachers and not the administration
- administration not doing their job...they should have computers at every site and be more prepared when school begins

- the Jones and Cook sites are not treated as fairly as the St. Luke site...they cater to St. Luke's...recent article about the program only mentioned St. Luke's and omitted the other two sites

In summary, these current students generally spoke very highly of the program and the benefits it provided to them and their children. There were some concerns raised about the lack of computers and computer and job skill training being provided at each of the sites. The students who attended Jones or Cook were especially concerned about the computer issue and wanted to see some action taken soon. Overall, the program received high praise from its current (Year 2) students.

Drop-outs: Years 1 and 2

Fourteen drop-outs from Year 2 were interviewed, but only 9 of the desired 20 drop-outs from Year 1 could be located. Although unable to achieve the planned sample size of 29, all possible means of reaching that original sample size were exhausted. The women from Year 1 were very difficult to locate because nearly two years had expired between the time they went to school and the time of the interviews. Many of the women had moved and could not be contacted. Although there is a smaller sample size than originally planned, the sample appears to be representative of the population of drop-outs.

When asked what things they liked about the program, the drop-outs were generally positive about their experiences. Responses included:

- it was nice for the children
- too many chiefs and not enough Indians — everyone wanted to lead and no one would listen
- meeting new friends
- not much...people were having too much fun and always in a playing mood
- I liked the teachers
- gave me a chance to brush up on my education
- spending time with child
- chance to get out of the house
- day care provided
- friendly people and nice teachers
- the classes

- PAC time
- parenting classes
- everything
- writing about ourselves and talking with others

When asked about what they learned during their participation, most women mentioned many of the same things that the current students stated; for example:

- learned math skills
- didn't learn anything...only talked about sex and women's stuff
- how to write a resume
- operating a computer
- punctuation, grammar and capitalization
- organizational skills
- learned to speak up for myself
- reading articles and books
- how to treat kids in a more understanding way
- values, morals
- writing skills
- learned how to be a better parent
- communicating with others
- GED skills for the test

These women were also satisfied with what their children were learning. They had high marks for their children's teachers and what they were being taught in the classroom. Comments included:

- my child learned his abc's
- learned to share with others and clean up mess
- put puzzles together
- learned colors and how to count
- taught him things I couldn't at home
- learned to sit down and pay attention
- singing songs
- gained more self-confidence
- shapes and sizes
- building blocks

When asked what they did not learn during the program the respondents were generally disappointed by the lack of GED preparation and the use and training of computer skills. Some responses were:

- thought it would be more like school

- computer skills
- math skills
- reading
- preparation for the GED
- paperwork was not graded
- needed career advisement
- learned everything

Next participants were asked to tell some of the things that they did not like about the program. Overall, there were positive comments as well as a few negative comments, and some suggestions for change. Responses included:

- too many breaks
- lack of control by teacher in the classroom
- half of the students came to play and not learn
- too much talking and giggling
- people (students) acting childish
- don't tell parents how to discipline their kids
- need better transportation
- more GED training needs to be offered
- no teaching of computer skills
- everything was very good
- really loved the program

Most respondents had high praise for their teachers and the instruction they received in the classroom, although there were some complaints about a few teachers from Year 1. They stated:

- didn't follow a set schedule (Year 1)
- did not instruct properly (Year 1)
- the teacher is very good and hard on us
- they taught us well
- very helpful and spent one-on-one time with us
- my teacher interested me into going to school
- very easy to understand
- looked up to my teacher as a big sister
- she was my mentor
- helped by putting math work on the board
- spent time with me and really helped me understand

Students were asked why they dropped out of the program and what would have kept them coming. Most students, with the exception of those who did not like the program (40%),

did not want to drop-out, but felt they were forced to do so because of personal reasons.

Reasons given included:

- lack of transportation
- was seven months pregnant
- felt like I was not motivated — just personal nothing about the program
- child care problems
- moved
- found employment
- the early morning hours
- child became sick and had to go to the hospital
- personal sickness
- involved in a car accident
- was not learning anything
- they were not teaching me
- teacher didn't know what she was doing
- people weren't reading
- I was too far behind other students; pride

In drawing some conclusions from these responses, it appears that about 60% of the people who dropped-out of the program did so because of personal reasons and that they would have continued coming if it were not for those personal emergencies. The other 40% were genuinely displeased with the program and wanted to see it work more for their educational purposes. Many of the drop-outs in Year 1 complained about the lack of quality of the teachers. In both years, some women said they dropped out because of dissatisfaction with child care. Overall, it appears that personal reasons are an important factor in determining or predicting drop-out rates. The majority of the people enjoyed the program and would have continued if it were not for personal reasons. However, attention to their comments about instruction, child care, and transportation is necessary.

Next, the respondents were asked what changes they would make in the program.

Suggestions included:

- have more tutors
- more teachers
- help in finding child care for younger children
- more career oriented programs

- keep up recruitment — more students are needed
- make the school day longer
- have a time policy so that everyone is on time
- nothing everything was fantastic
- be more demanding of the students
- no smoking in the classroom buildings (Cook)
- more field trips

When asked about what they were doing since dropping out of the program: 55% of the women were at home taking care of their children; 40% were employed; and 5% were in school.

Of the women who had children in kindergarten, all stated that their children were doing well in school and that the program helped them get a head start on the other children. They had really high praise for the teaching that their children received while in the Family Learning Program.

Once again at the end of the survey the respondents were asked to address any questions or comments that were not directly dealt with in the interview. This sample of drop-outs gave similar responses to the current students. They were generally concerned about the computer issue and the lack of training they were getting on the computer. They understood the importance of computer knowledge in their quest for meaningful employment. There were also some more concerns about equal treatment of the school sites. There was the feeling that St. Luke's was given preferential treatment.

Overall, their recollections of the program were very positive. Many expressed a desire to return during the next school year.

Program Graduates

Three students who completed the program in Year 1 were interviewed. Once again difficulties in reaching some of the women, reduced the sample size from the original five to three.

The women in this group praised the program and its ability to help them achieve their goals. They felt that the curriculum offered to them was excellent and beneficial in achieving their goal of a GED. In fact, one of the women received her GED on the day of the interview.

What they learned and what their children learned in the program was similar to what the women in the other two groups reported. The program helped them sharpen their skills in math and English as well as enhance their personal communication skills. That their children also benefitted greatly from the program is evident in their high performance and adaptability to Kindergarten.

These women spoke highly of their teachers and their instructional abilities. One woman said that her teacher was like family. "Always there for you...and concerned about you."

The women in this cohort are now either working or going to school. They continuously acknowledged the benefits that they had received from the program and how it has helped them to attempt to break the intergenerational cycle of literacy. The experiences of these women are good indicators of the effectiveness for students who stick with the program and attend regularly throughout an entire school year.

Summary

Overall the participants were happy with the program. Approximately 60% of the drop-outs were for personal reasons; the rest for reasons of dissatisfaction with the literacy program. More of the Year 1 drop-outs commented about the low quality of the instructors than did those in Year 2.

About half of the second year drop-outs are now working; the other half are at home caring for their children as are over three quarters of the Year 1 drop-outs. In contrast, those women who completed the first year (graduates) were working, seeking work, or continuing in school.

It appears that the teachers are the most important aspect of the whole program and, accordingly, are highly praised by the students who are satisfied. The program should continue supporting innovative teaching skills and encourage teachers to persist in their efforts to be personally involved in the learning process of their students. This is truly the backbone of the program.

Many negative comments were received about the computer program; they felt that the flyers promised computer instruction and that traveling occasionally to St. Luke's to use the computers was not satisfactory. That was one source of the impression that St. Luke's is the "favored" program, a comment that was made over and over again. Clearly the computer program was a source of irritation that needs to be addressed.

Most of the mothers were pleased with the program for their children and felt they had learned a lot and were making or would make good progress in kindergarten. Some mothers commented negatively about PAC time and did not seem to understand the connection between their literacy instruction and the time with their children.

The general impression is that this sample was pleased with the program and felt it was beneficial for them and their children.

Recommendations

One area of needed improvement is purchasing more computers for the students to use. This appears to be a serious problem that must be addressed. The women in the program realize the benefits of computer training and thus demand that it be part of their curriculum. The program must also alter the perception among students and teachers that one site is favored over the others.

Specific changes recommended are:

1. Add computers and computer instruction at each site.

2. Provide better feedback to students regarding their progress.
3. Stop in-take at spring break.
4. Have more instructional materials, more books to read.
5. Add more structure to the program; e.g., begin on time each day, fewer breaks, less talking (visiting) among participants.
6. Attend to the impression that St. Luke's is the "favored" site.
7. No smoking (at Cook).
8. Make clearer to the participants the connection between their adult literacy instruction and PAC; also the connection between basic literacy instruction and the preparation for the GED.

Appendix A

CSAL (Toyota Project) Interview Guideline

ID# _____

Date _____

- 1) What did you like about the program?
- 2) What did you learn during your participation?
- 3) What did your child learn?
- 4) What did you not learn?
- 5) What did you not like about the program?
- 6) Tell me about your teachers and the instruction?

7) Why did you drop-out of the program?

8) What would have kept you coming to the program?

9) What changes would you make in the program?

10) What are you doing now? (i.e. working, going to school)

11) How are your children doing in Kindergarten?

12) Is there anything else about the program you would like to talk about?